

What Did You Call Me? Results of a Pilot Study to Investigate Perspectives from Future School Library Administrators about Appropriate Job Titles

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Abstract

The topic of the appropriate job title for school library administrators has been written about in earlier literature but has not addressed the issue from the perspective of future school library administrators. This article presents the results of a pilot study that was guided by the research question: What do future school library administrators believe is an appropriate title for their position? The article reports demographic data, reveals participants' job title preference, and discusses the ways that pilot study feedback will shape the revised data collection instrument to be used in a large-scale study.

Introduction

A movie produced in 2006 by playwright-turned-screenwriter Tyler Perry included a scene wherein the main character attempted to comfort a teenager fretting about being teased by her classmates. "It ain't [sic] what people call you," Madea explained. "It's what you answer to." This response succeeded in consoling the upset teen, but should that same principle be applied with respect to school library administrators?¹

Names, including job titles, have meanings that "convey an image, accord a particular standing, a degree of respect, and a perception of worth" (Cummins, 2001, p. 9). That is, an individual's job title not only indicates her job duties but provides a classification of sorts that speaks to that individual's value and status within an organization (Baron & Bielby, 1986). More specifically, the school library administrator's title is important because it sets expectations for the title bearer, his colleagues, and others with whom he comes into contact (Garvey, 2000). In order for the next generation of school library administrators to establish positions of importance in the school and broader professional community, it is of benefit for them to contribute to the conversation about their preferred moniker.

Many times, the term of choice for an individual with the appropriate credentials to work in a library is simply 'librarian.' However, as was noted by Braun (2002), "librarians are not just called librarians anymore. Increasingly their job responsibilities and titles provide a framework for the ...role that they play within the library" (p. 46). If Braun's statement is accurate, what is the appropriate title for individuals who render service in a K-12 school library environment? Previous writings

on the topic of school library administrator job titles have generally been in the form of brief editorials that make inquiries but leave unanswered what job titles school library administrators prefer and why they have chosen these titles. Additionally, prior examinations have focused on current practitioners as opposed to individuals preparing to enter the field. It is important for the next generation of school library administrators to have input in determining which designation adequately symbolizes the multi-faceted and essential roles associated with their chosen profession.

Purpose of Study/Research Question

This article presents the results of the researcher's initial inquiry into the topic of school library administrator job titles. The researcher sought an answer to the question: What do future school library administrators (those individuals who are currently enrolled in school library media certification programs) believe is an appropriate title for their position? To answer this question, a pilot study was conducted through which data were collected from students enrolled in the School Media specialization of a leading Library and Information Studies (LIS) program.

Review of Literature: Roles, Responsibilities, and Status of School Library Administrators

The idea that job titles are a means of identification that cause others to form ideas about a person's position or status is not a new concept in any occupational field (Johnson, 2005). Thus, the debate about the appropriate job title for school library administrators is not new either (McGinnis, 2002). As the duties expected to be performed by school library administrators have been altered and defined differently, so too has the need for a title that appropriately reflects the importance of the job, the relevance of the work associated with it, and the

¹ In this study, the term 'school library administrator' is defined as an individual who is responsible for managing a school library media center.

status of the administrator in his or her respective school community (Braun, 2002; Cummins, 2001). Research shows that a job title “should be reflective of the nature and level of the work” performed by the title bearer (Garvey, 2000, p. 116). Because of this, it is important to inquire about what job titles future school library administrators prefer that adequately reflects their perceptions about their contributions to and position within their school communities.

Perceptions about the roles of school library administrators have become more defined over time. The earliest school library administrators were simply called ‘librarians’ (Johnson, 2005). In order to reflect the place at which services were rendered, the title ‘school librarian’ emerged to describe an individual who served patrons at an elementary, middle, or high school library. As school library collections increased in their number of multimedia items, the term ‘media specialist’ began to take hold as a means of describing the change (Johnson, 2005). In 1933, Lucille Fargo’s treatment of the topic titled *The Library in the School* noted that an individual in charge of a school library was equal parts administrator, technician, and educator (p. 55). In 1947, Fargo expanded her explanation of the roles of the school library administrator to state that she was (1) an administrator who sets schedules for her staff and budgets library funds; (2) a technician, who knows “how to organize materials”; (3) an educator and guidance counselor who works with teachers and student clubs and committees; and (4) public relations specialist who “makes friends with associates on the school staff [and] looks around for opportunities for cordial contacts with the school and local community” (pp. 111-112).

In addition to Fargo’s description (1933) of desired and necessary characteristics, the author suggested that the status of school library administrators, once uncertain, was becoming more established and recognized by the field with which they were associated as well as with members of the educational community. Fargo noted that “the intimacy and constancy of the librarian’s daily ministrations give the prestige...of faculty member” (p. 41). Fourteen years later, Fargo (1947) determined that the school library administrator was, more often than not, afforded the same status as that of other instructional staff (p. 108). Practitioners and researchers have subsequently echoed Fargo’s idea that the school library administrator is not just the keeper of books but a trained educator and valued teaching collaborator (Harvey, 2005; Loertscher, 2004; Stanley, 2006).

Other writings have highlighted the school library administrator’s instructional duties as well as presented

expanded position definitions. A document titled *Standards for School Library Programs* published in 1960 by the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) presented the school library administrator’s role in the school even more fully than Fargo’s descriptions. *Standards* noted that the school library administrator should be prepared and expected to:

- 1- collaborate with classroom teachers and other faculty members to “make the school library of optimum service to them”;
- 2- stimulate and guide student reading;
- 3- plan and implement instruction to teach students how to effectively use the library’s resources;
- 4- serve the school as a book (and other materials) specialist;
- 5- serve on committees related to curriculum development;
- 6- assist with evaluating school textbooks; and
- 7- participate in “co-curricular activities of the school” through which “he can make the greatest contribution” (pp. 48-49).

In 1988, AASL collaborated with the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) to produce the guidebook *Information Power: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs*. This document described “separate but overlapping roles” of school library administrators (AASL & AECT, 1998, g. 26). These roles were listed as (1) information specialist—in which capacity the library administrator serves as “advisor to students as they select appropriate resources for personal and academic needs”; (2) teacher—in which capacity the administrator is (sometimes in collaboration with other school instructors) “responsible for ensuring that skills, knowledge, and attitudes concerning information access, use, and communication are an integral part of the school curriculum”; and (3) instructional consultant—in which capacity the school library administrator acts as “consultant to teachers [and] employ a wide range of resources and teaching methodologies to meet the intellectual and developmental needs of students” (pp. 30-34). The updated version of the 1988 guide titled *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning* (1998) added the role of program administrator to the previous listing to describe an individual who “works collaboratively with members of the learning community to define the policies of the library media program and to guide and direct all the activities related to it” (AASL & AECT, 1998, p. 5).

Literature related to the topic of school library administrators’ roles and responsibilities provides

evidence that perceptions held about these individuals by researchers and practitioners in the LIS field has consistently evolved. Previous writings recommended that the school library administrator should be accepted as both educator and library professional whose presence is vital in the school community and who should have the same status as other faculty members.

Methodology

This article reports the results of a pilot study wherein students enrolled in the School Media program at a leading Information Studies School were invited to participate as respondents. Participants were recruited via a call for participation circulated through an intra-school listserv; thirty one students submitted completed electronic questionnaires.

Figure 1. Respondents' Identification of Race/Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	Response Count	Response Percent (Rounded)
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0	0%
Asian or Pacific Islander	1	3%
Black/African American (not Hispanic)	1	3%
Hispanic	0	0%
White (not Hispanic)	28	91%
Other	1	3%
TOTAL	31	100%

At the time the study was conducted, 74% (n=23) of the participants were not employed at a school library. However, eight respondents (26%) indicated that they were already working as school library administrators. Most study participants (n=25 or 81%) planned to seek employment in public schools once they had completed their program of study. One respondent selected a private school as a preferred employment setting while several of her cohorts (n=5) either planned to apply for employment at both public and private schools, were

Study Results

Demographic Data

All pilot study respondents were female, and ranged in age from 26 to 57. With respect to race/ethnicity, 28 participants (88%) were White/Caucasian and not of Hispanic descent; one respondent (3%) was Asian/Pacific Islander, one respondent was African American, and one respondent (3%) identified as being of a race or ethnicity other than those listed (see Figure 1). No respondents were American Indian, Alaskan Native, or Hispanic.

The majority of the respondents (n=18 or 58%) indicated that they would complete their education in 2008. Twelve respondents (39%) answered that they would complete the program in 2009 and one respondent (3%) planned to finish her program of study in 2010.

unsure of their preferred school type, or did not plan to work at school settings at all (see Figure 2). With respect to the grade levels for whom the future school library administrators would prefer to provide services in their first position, 18 (58%) selected elementary school as a first choice, 7 (23%) selected middle school as a first choice, and 6 (19%) respondents selected the high school setting as a first employment choice (see Figure 3 for a complete list of respondents' grade level preferences).

Figure 2. Respondents' Preferred School Type

School Type	Response Count	Response Percent (Rounded)
Public	25	81%
Private	1	3%
Charter	0	0%
Do not plan to seek employment at a school	2	6%
Other	3	10%
TOTAL	31	100%

Figure 3. Respondents' Grade Level of Service Preference

Grade Level	1 st Choice	2 nd Choice	3 rd Choice
Elementary School (Pre-K through 5 th grade)	18	3	10
Middle School (6 th through 8 th grade)	7	20	4
High School (9 th through 12 th grade)	6	8	17
TOTAL	31	31	31

Job Title Preference Data

In order to collect information about the job titles that future school library administrators believe are most appropriate, study respondents were first asked to select from among a set of titles.² Of the titles provided, the most frequently selected title was teacher librarian (n=10 or 32%). The second most frequently selected job title was school librarian, which was chosen by six (19%) respondents. The title of library media specialist was chosen by 13% (n=4) of the respondents. Librarian and library media teacher were each chosen as titles of preference by three respondents. Finally, three respondents suggested titles that were not included on the survey questionnaire: library/information specialist, school library specialist, school library media administrator. Two participants declined to respond to this item. Figure 4 contains a listing of the titles and a complete response count.

Figure 4. Respondents' Job Title Preferences

Job Title	Response Count	Response Percent (Rounded)
Librarian	3	10%
Library Media Specialist	4	13%
Library Media Teacher	3	10%
Media Specialist	0	0%
School Librarian	6	19%
Teacher Librarian	10	32%
Other	3	10%
No Response	2	6%
TOTAL	31	100%

² The job title listing was developed from a compilation presented by John McGinnis in 2002.

Discussion

The pilot study collected broadly descriptive data that are important for presenting a general picture of the survey respondents and for answering the question of what job title each believed was most appropriate based upon her understanding of the roles and duties of school library administrators. Additionally, responses collected during the pilot study were advisory, and helped the researcher to revise the survey instrument that will be used in a national iteration of the study. Following are descriptions of the changes made to the survey questionnaire as a result of the feedback. The original data collection instrument appears at the close of the article.

Revisions Related to Demographic Information

Three respondents questioned the necessity of questionnaire item three which was worded “*What is your racial ethnicity?*” This item will remain on the future survey instrument, however, the item will be reworded to ask “*What is your racial/ethnic identity?*” and may also include an answer option “*Prefer not to say*” to allow participants to opt out of answering this question.

Questionnaire item eight asked respondents to indicate the type of school (public, private, etc.) at which they would seek employment upon completing their program of study. Participants who were currently employed at a school expressed confusion about which option to choose since they would not actually seek employment once they completed their education. To this item will be added instructions for the participant to include the school at which they are currently employed if they intend to remain at that institution.

Four participants expressed concern that the number of demographic questions was unnecessarily long and detracted from their interest in completing the study. To address this concern, the researcher will remove items four (which asked about highest educational level) and seven (which asked participants how many semesters or quarters they had been enrolled in a program of study). These items were determined to be unnecessary for collecting data relevant to addressing the research question. Additionally, questionnaire item nine (which asked respondents to rank order their grade level preference) will be reworded to so that respondents have the opportunity to select the ideal grade level for their first place of employment following completion of their program of study.

Revisions Related to Job Title Preferences

Questionnaire item 10 asked “*What do you believe is the appropriate job title for you once you become responsible for administering a school library/media center?*” Three respondents indicated that they would have felt more comfortable with the option to rank order their preference of the list of titles. The revised questionnaire will replace this item with one that asks respondents to choose three preferred job titles from a list of randomly ordered titles. The next questionnaire item will ask respondents to then choose the **most appropriate** title from the three they selected.

Conclusions and Implications for Research and Practice

The results of this pilot study may indicate that future school library administrators have distinct opinions about what they wish to be called. The responses collected in this initial study are a first step toward uncovering data that are significant for explaining why these titles are important to the respondents. For example, the fact that the title teacher librarian was most frequently chosen speaks to the respondents’ belief, and supports views expressed that it is important for all members of the school community to recognize the school library administrator as a trained, certified educator who is qualified and ready to deliver instruction. Whereas the ‘teacher-librarian’ Fargo (1947) described was a full time teacher who was required to spend a small portion of her time in the library, survey respondents deem today’s teacher librarian to be an instructor whose classroom is the library media center.

Though the small sample size does not allow the researcher to draw definitive conclusions about the topic, the results of the pilot study suggest that the topic of school library administrator job titles is an important one to explore further. A large-scale study is planned that will collect information about this issue from students enrolled in school library programs across the nation. The results of the national study should be of significant interest to practitioners and researchers alike because these data will present a more comprehensive representation of currently matriculating school media students’ beliefs about the roles, responsibilities, and status of school library administrators.

It is expected that the results of such a comprehensive study will allow future library administrators to contribute perspectives that lead to establishing a solid identity for school library administrators. Further, data collected in the national study—widely distributed—should impact the perceptions of members of the school

community, the broader LIS community, and the public in general with respect to the value of school library administrators. Results from both the pilot study and the subsequently planned national study will help to move the title used for school library administrators from one that is simply accepted to one of their choosing that accurately reflects their role in and value to the school community.

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Pilot Study Survey Instrument

I. Background Information

Instructions: The following items collect demographic information. Please select the most appropriate answer for each item or enter correct information in the area provided.

1. Gender
 - Female
 - Male
2. What is the year of your birth?
19_____
3. What is your racial ethnicity? (SELECT ONLY ONE)
 - American Indian or Alaskan Native
 - Asian or Pacific Islander
 - Black/African American (not Hispanic)
 - Hispanic
 - White (not Hispanic)
 - Other (Specify) _____
4. What is the highest level of formal education you have completed? CHOOSE ONLY ONE. DO NOT INCLUDE THE DEGREE PROGRAM IN WHICH YOU ARE CURRENTLY ENROLLED.
 - Bachelor's degree
 - Post Bachelor's study
 - Master's degree
 - Post Master's study
 - Two Master's degrees
 - Specialist degree/certification
 - Ph.D./Ed.D.
 - Other (Specify) _____

II. Program of Study/Employment Items

Instructions: This section contains items that collect information about your current program of study and future employment plans.

5. Are you currently employed at a school library/media center?
Yes and I am:
A library administrator
A library assistant/clerk
Other (Specify)
No
6. In what year do you anticipate completing your program of study in school library media?
20_____
7. Including the current semester/quarter, how many semesters/quarters have you been enrolled in a school library media program of study?
8. In what type of school do you plan to seek employment once you have completed your school library media program of study? (SELECT ONLY ONE)
 - Public Nonmagnet

- Private
- Charter
- Public Magnet
- Other (Specify) _____

9. Please place in rank order the grade level school at which you would prefer to be employed in the location at which you are hired after completing your school library media program of study. (1st choice, 2nd choice, 3rd choice)

- Elementary School (Pre-K/K through 5th grade)
- Middle School (6th through 8th grade)
- High School (9th through 12th grade)
- Other (Specify) _____

II. Job Title Information

Instructions: The following items collect information related to job title preference. Please select the most appropriate answer or enter correct information in the area provided.

10. What do you believe is the appropriate job title for you once you become responsible for administering a school library/media center? In deciding on your answer, consider your perception of the qualifications and responsibilities of a school library administrator.

- Librarian
- Library Media Specialist
- Library Media Teacher
- Media Specialist
- School Librarian
- Teacher Librarian
- Other

11. Please describe in your own words why you have chosen this as an appropriate job title.

III. Pilot Test Feedback

Instructions: Your participation in this pilot test provides me with valuable information. In this final section, please respond to each question in the areas provided.

- 12a. How many mintues did it take you to complete the questionnaire?
- 12b. Were the instructions in each section of the questionnaire clearly written?
- 12c. Were any questionnaire items unclear or ambiguous? If so, please list the item numbers. Please also offer suggestions for how the items might be better presented.
- 12d. Did you object to responding to any questionnaire items? If so, please express why (if you feel comfortable doing so).
- 12e. Was the questionnaire layout clear and attractive? If not, what could have been done to improve its clarity and attractiveness?
- 12f. Please provide any additional comments that you feel would be useful in helping the researcher to improve the quality of this document.



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